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Bellator agrees to terms with Gilbert Melendez, UFC holds right to match

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By **Shaun Al-Shatti** | [@shaunalshatti](#) | Feb 14, 2014, 7:09pm EST



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Bellator MMA and longtime Strikeforce champion Gilbert Melendez have agreed to terms that would bring the UFC's No. 2 ranked lightweight into the Bellator fold.

Bellator officials announced the news in a release Friday, characterizing the deal as a "multi-fight, multi-year" agreement.

The UFC presently holds the rights to match Bellator's offer.

"The moment Gil was legally able to explore the free agent market, Gil's management team reached out to me and we began figuring out how to bring Gil to Bellator," Bellator CEO [Bjorn Rebney](#) said in a statement.

"It's no secret that I've been a big 'El Nino' fan for many years. Gil was one of the first fighters I tried to sign when I launched Bellator back in 2008, and he's grown and developed into one of the best and most exciting lightweights on earth. Gil has a vision for what he wants to accomplish both inside and outside the cage and we can help make his vision a reality. We are in the business of developing and showcasing the greatest fighters on earth. That's what we intend to do here with Gil and it's what we'll continue to do in the future."

Melendez responded to the news via Twitter on Friday.

"As soon as I was a free agent, I had my team call Bellator, and Bjorn made an amazing offer that would allow me to reach my goals," he wrote. "It's an [opportunity] to be a part of something special and I could make history testing myself against some of the toughest LWs in the world. If the UFC wants me, they have the right to match. I'll let the fans know more as soon as it's settled."

The announcement comes less than a year after Melendez (22-3) made his UFC debut following the dissolution of Strikeforce.

Under the UFC banner, Melendez instantly solidified himself as one of the premier lightweights in the world when he barely dropped a contentious split decision against then-champion Benson Henderson at UFC on FOX 7.

Melendez followed up that performance by besting [Diego Sanchez](#) in an electric brawl at [UFC 166](#), which UFC President [Dana White](#) called "one of the best fights I've ever seen."

Melendez's contract expired after the Sanchez bout. Following months of stalled negotiations, the situation [came to a head](#) earlier this week as White publicly dissociated himself from Melendez's management team, which is led by Georges St-Pierre's manager Rodolphe Beaulieu.

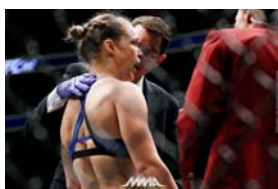
"I'm done," White told Ariel Helwani, as reported on *UFC Tonight*. "It's not going well. I couldn't care less about it anymore. I like Gilbert Melendez, I don't like his management."

White added that, "If [Melendez] wants to fight in the UFC, he better talk to Lorenzo (Fertitta) quick," and advised that if the situation did not improve, Melendez "better start looking elsewhere."

The statements prompted a response from Bellator standout [Michael Chandler](#), who [tweeted earlier this week](#), "Seeing this news about Gilbert Melendez has me excited. Who wants to see me welcome him to Bellator MMA after I beat Eddie?"

MMAFighting.com will continue to update this story as it unfolds.

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